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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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SOVIET STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE NEXT SIX MONTHS

Summary

The USSR's inability to affect the outcome of or capitalize on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the continuing war between Iran and Iraq has highlighted the limits of Soviet influence in the Middle East. Moscow's prestige and credibility with states in the region have sunk to the lowest point in years. The fundamental weaknesses of the Soviet position in the region argue against a quick reversal of fortunes. Nevertheless, the Soviets have already begun to recoup some of their losses through their one dependable asset--military assistance. The Kremlin's initial actions have focused on Syria and have led to some improvement in the relationship. We believe the broader thrust of Moscow's efforts, however, will be to block the emergence of a US-sponsored, Arab-Israeli settlement that would exclude the USSR and to prevent a further deterioration of its position in Iran and Iraq. The success of this strategy is largely dependent upon the actions of governments over which the Soviets have little or no control.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Soviet Analysis, Current Support Division, for Geoffrey Kemp, Senior Middle East officer of the NSC Staff, at the request of the NIO for Near East/South Asia. It is to be drawn upon in the redrafting of National Security Study Directive (NSSD) 4: US Strategy for the Near East and Southwest Asia. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to [redacted]

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The Current Balance Sheet

The Kremlin's key Arab allies--Syria and the PLO--suffered major military defeats in Lebanon. The seeming ease with which the Israelis scored their victories caused the Arabs to question the effectiveness of Soviet weapons. Moscow had to watch from the sidelines as the US negotiated a withdrawal of PLO and Syrian troops from Beirut and as peacekeeping forces from three NATO members were deployed in Lebanon--possibly for a long stay. Syria is in a much more vulnerable position militarily, with Israeli forces poised on its western flank in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and straddling the Beirut-Damascus highway. The PLO's military arm--which is Soviet-supplied--has been decimated. If the PLO shifts the emphasis of its struggle to the political sphere, as seems likely, its ties to the USSR will diminish in importance. [REDACTED]

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Libya--another Soviet ally--further isolated itself from the Arab community by its scathing attacks on other Arab governments for failing to come to the aid of the Palestinians and its own reckless advice to the PLO that its members commit suicide rather than withdraw from Beirut. There have even been signs of strain between Moscow and the heretofore solidly pro-Soviet regime in South Yemen. [REDACTED]

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Finally, the war between Iran and Iraq continues to frustrate the USSR. It has sought to preserve relations with each side by not appearing to tilt decisively toward either but has only succeeded in antagonizing both. [REDACTED]

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Despite these developments, the picture is not all bleak for the Soviets. Syria's vulnerability has made it more dependent upon Moscow than ever. Notwithstanding their doubts about the performance of Soviet arms, Damascus and the other major arms clients of the USSR in the region have few alternatives to continued dependence on Soviet weaponry. Even Iraq, which has taken steps to diversify its sources, has found that it can ill afford to jeopardize the Soviet arms link as long as the war with Iran continues. Jordan has begun to receive its first Soviet weapons and military advisers, and it continues to acknowledge the need for Moscow to play a role in the Middle East peace process. In addition, the US image in the Arab world has also suffered due to the widely-held perception that Washington bears responsibility for Israel's actions in Lebanon. [REDACTED]

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Syria

The Kremlin's efforts to recoup its losses are centered on Syria. Moscow has already replaced much of the weaponry Damascus lost during the conflict. [REDACTED]

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We believe the USSR will continue to be forthcoming in meeting Syria's military needs but will advise Damascus not to make any provocative moves against Israeli forces in Lebanon. The Soviets recognize the vulnerability of the Syrian position there. They almost certainly want to avoid a major Israeli-Syrian battle that would lead to another Syrian defeat and might also prompt Assad to request direct Soviet military intervention, which Moscow remains reluctant to provide. [REDACTED]

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Negotiations to obtain mutual Syrian and Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon would cause problems for Moscow. They are not likely to urge Assad to withdraw if it involved US mediation, which would again leave the USSR on the sidelines. Moscow, in this case, would probably utilize its leverage with Damascus in an attempt to forestall a US-sponsored solution, but would have little choice other than to acquiesce if the Syrians decide to go along. [REDACTED]

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The PLO

The Soviets can also be expected to maintain their concerted effort to repair their damaged relations with the PLO. In our judgment, their main objective will be to derail any move by the PLO toward the moderate Arab states or the US. Moscow's concerns on this score appear to have been intensified by PLO leader Arafat's failure to reject outright the US Middle East peace initiative and by his mid-October discussions with Jordan's King Hussein. [REDACTED]

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Since the summer, Moscow has been promoting its links with the radical PLO factions of George Habash (PFLP) and Naif Hawatmah (DFLP) in an apparent effort to obtain leverage over Arafat and to deflect the PLO from a moderate course. If the PLO splits over the issue of Arafat's more moderate course, the Soviets could throw their support behind the PFLP and DFLP. They also could funnel additional arms to PLO fighters in northeastern Lebanon to encourage a confrontational course with Israel. But the Kremlin undoubtedly realizes that Arafat will remain the most influential Palestinian spokesman, and it will not burn all its bridges with him, even if he begins to talk with the US. Furthermore, the Soviets will have to tread a delicate path in the growing dispute between Arafat and Assad to avoid further alienating either. [REDACTED]

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The Peace Process

Soviet media commentary and private statements by Soviet diplomats suggest that Moscow is deeply concerned by signs of Arab movement toward consideration of a US-sponsored peace settlement, as this threatens to perpetuate Soviet isolation from Middle Eastern diplomacy. These recent developments include:

- The qualified praise many Arab officials have given President Reagan's initiative;
- The moderation of the Arab position at the Fez summit;
- The discussions between the two sides in Washington in October; and
- The talks between Arafat and King Hussein concerning a Jordanian-Palestinian political affiliation. []

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The USSR has already mounted an effort to have its voice heard in the latest round of maneuvering by repackaging President Brezhnev's long-standing proposal for an international conference on the Arab-Israeli question. This new version incorporates some of the points of the Fez plan in an effort to convince the Arabs that the Soviet proposal, unlike the US one, is compatible with their position. The Soviets have vociferously disparaged the US initiative, claiming that it ignores Palestinian interests. []

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Moscow will continue to lobby intensively with the Arabs on this issue. It probably will host a delegation from the Arab League, similar to the one that has just visited Washington, to discuss the Fez and Brezhnev plans. We judge that winning support for their own plan is of secondary importance to the Soviets. Their primary goal will be to scuttle any further movement toward a new US-Arab dialogue on the peace process. []

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Iran and Iraq

The failure of Iran's offensive into Iraq has taken the pressure off the USSR for a major reassessment of its policy toward the war. Since Iran's July offensive, Moscow has tilted slightly toward Iraq, voting twice in the UN Security Council for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal to the pre-war border. Tehran has roundly condemned the USSR for these votes. The Soviets also have continued to ship a steady flow of arms to Iraq. Iran, at the same time, is procuring Soviet-designed or -built weapons from North Korea, Syria, Libya and East European countries, but only limited amounts directly from the USSR. The Kremlin, however, has earned little gratitude in Baghdad for this policy. []

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In part because of this slight pro-Iraqi tilt, Soviet-Iranian relations are now at their lowest ebb since the summer of 1980, when former Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh waged a personal campaign against Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The Soviets have stepped up media polemics against Tehran's anti-Soviet policies and pronouncements and have adopted a more aggressive

stance toward Afghan insurgent operations near the border between Iran and Afghanistan. Moscow appears to have concluded that the chances for an early end to the downward swing in relations are slim. Although the Soviets will continue to probe for any willingness in Tehran to improve ties, relations are unlikely to improve during the next half year. Nevertheless, past Soviet performance during the war suggests that the USSR is unlikely to tilt more decisively toward Iraq during the next six months for fear of doing more lasting damage to its ties with Iran. [REDACTED]

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Libya and South Yemen

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The Soviets are continuing to expand their use of Libyan air and naval facilities, but they will be careful to avoid getting entangled in Qadhafi's running dispute with the US over the extent of Libya's jurisdiction in the Gulf of Sidra. Moscow, similarly, will continue to develop its military relationship with South Yemen. Its misgivings about President Hasani's more open attitude toward economic dealings with the West and China are probably still outweighed by the fact that his overall policy, on balance, is firmly pro-Soviet. The Soviets, nevertheless, will monitor Hasani's performance closely and will seek to maintain their assets in the South Yemeni ruling hierarchy as a form of leverage and as a base from which to mount a move against him in the future should they deem it necessary.

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The Arab Moderates

Moscow will not back away during the next six months from its steady effort to drive a wedge between the US and moderate Arab states. Egypt, which the Soviets consider the most important Arab country, will remain the primary focus of this effort. The Soviets will continue to probe for an Egyptian willingness to improve ties. They will probably make some progress in the economic sphere and might obtain the return of both ambassadors to their respective posts. President Mubarak's deep mistrust of the USSR, however, all but rules out a dramatic breakthrough in relations over the next half year. The same can be said with regard to Soviet-Saudi Arabian relations, which remain dormant despite repeated Soviet overtures. [REDACTED]

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Moscow will attempt to build upon the success it has had over the last few years in improving its ties with Jordan, Kuwait and North Yemen. Soviet provision of arms will remain an

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important aspect of each relationship, but the Soviets will continue to seek a broadening of the political, economic and cultural aspects as well. [REDACTED]

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Israel

Soviet-Israeli relations have declined to their lowest point as a result of mutual polemics over Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Since then, Moscow has publicly questioned the right of Israel to remain a member of the UN and voted twice to oust Tel Aviv from UN-affiliated organizations. Despite this, the Soviets, as always, will keep the door open for dialogue with Israel. They would benefit greatly from the ability to talk to both sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Arab resentment of Israel is at such a fever pitch, however, that the chances of a Soviet move to improve relations with Tel Aviv during the next six months are remote. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

In our judgment, Moscow's primary objectives over the next few months will be to restore its damaged credibility with its allies in the Middle East, block the emergence of a US-Arab dialogue based on the American and Arab peace plans and prevent further deterioration of its position in Iran and Iraq. The ability of the Soviets to achieve these objectives, however, will depend less upon their own actions than upon the creativity of US peacemaking efforts, the Arab world's perception of the utility of achieving its goals through negotiation, Israeli moves and the course of the war between Iran and Iraq. Barring dramatic internal changes in key countries that might bring a more pro-Soviet regime to power, Moscow's best chance for quickly regaining ground lies in exploiting any Arab disillusionment should the US fail to lessen Israeli intransigence. [REDACTED]

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